

ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT
CONSTRUCTION OF BOAT RAMP AND PARKING LOT
OSBORNE BRIDGE, PATOKA LAKE

FW-21-D-33

Submitted by:
Indiana Department of Natural Resources
Division of State Parks & Reservoirs

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With Additions by U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service

Maps and supporting photographs can be found at the following locations:

http://www.fws.gov/r3pao/fed_aid/patoka-maps.htm
http://www.fws.gov/r3pao/fed_aid/patoka-photos.htm

BACKGROUND/INTRODUCTION

Patoka Lake is an 8,800 acre Corps of Engineers flood control reservoir located in Dubois, Crawford and Orange counties Indiana. The reservoir and surrounding land is leased (DACW 27-71-C-0061) by the State of Indiana, Department of Natural Resources for recreation and/or fish and wildlife enhancement. The lease shall remain in full force as long as the Government continues to operate the Project.

Patoka is the largest lake/reservoir in southern Indiana. Because of this, the demand for water related recreation is very high. The property has 546 campsites, archery range, Frisbee golf course, hiking/fitness/bicycle trails, shelter houses, swimming beach, Interpretive programs and 16,000 ac. of huntable land exclusive of the reservoir. Visitation for 1997 was 1,170,400 and for 1998, 1,189,300. As the area is developed and visitation increases, there will be a need for additional facilities, including boat ramps and parking facilities to allow public access to all areas of the lake.

Purpose and Need for Action

With the increased usage of the lake, the need for increased access to this portion of the lake by fisherman and waterfowl hunters was reviewed. Since this area of the lake is zoned "idle", it was considered that many hunters and fisherman may not be using the area to its fullest extent. Six of the nine existing launch ramps are located west of highway 145 and only three are located east of the highway. Two of the three ramps are located on tributary areas of the lake and do not access the upper reaches of Patoka Lake (Patoka River). This leaves only one ramp, Walls Ramp, on the approximately 7 mile length of Patoka Lake east of highway 145. Personnel from the Division of State Parks & Reservoirs, Division of Engineering and the Division of Fish & Wildlife have surveyed the area east of highway 145 and determined a location for the construction of a two lane boat ramp and 45 space parking lot.

It should be pointed out that the owners of a resort located east of State Road 145 suggested the need for the development of a ramp at the Osborne Bridge site in the mid 1980's. At that time the Department of Natural Resources reviewed the situation and agreed that a ramp in that area of the reservoir was needed and would well serve the public. The resort owners have remained staunch supporters of the project since their cabin guests will also have better access to the lake. However, the project as proposed has been designed to serve the needs of the general public.

ALTERNATIVES

There are four alternatives and each are discussed below.

Alternative A: No Action

It is felt that this alternative would not be in the best interest of the public because it would allow an area of very good hunting and fishing opportunities to go under utilized.

Alternative B: Construction In Another Location of The Reservoir

In looking at the reservoir and determining the location of another ramp to better serve the public, and provide access to the reservoir area east of highway 145, two options were identified. One was to locate a ramp in the upper reaches of Patoka Lake near Ethel/Chapel Roads or west of the present location of Walls Ramp. Because the reservoir east of Walls Ramp is in the waterfowl resting area, this would prohibit the use of the ramp during the fall hunting periods by both hunters and fisherman. Access would be permitted only for hunters during times of special waterfowl hunts but still would be off limits for fisherman. Because of this, the ramp would have to be located west of Walls Ramp.

Alternative C: Construction Just South of Preferred Location on Same Peninsula

This alternative was looked at the beginning of the process. Because the construction in this area would remove 4-6 ac. of upland habitat, an alternate location was looked for. Also, construction in this area would increase the cost of the project by over \$55,000.00 because of the additional access road that would be required to be constructed. This additional road construction would reduce the available upland wildlife habitat in that area. Since this area is open to public hunting and is one of the few upland habitats in this area, it was determined that another location might have a lower negative impact on wildlife.

Alternative D: Construction of Ramp at Osborne Bridge Site (preferred alternative)

This area is located at the end of an existing county road one half mile east of state road 145. No new road construction would be required except for the approach to the ramp itself. It would also enhance the usage of the handicapped accessible fishing pier that is already located at this site. Hunters and fisherman would be able to access both the main lake or the upper reaches from this location. The area is now used by the occasional bank fisherman, but no parking facilities are present.

A major concern with regard to this site is the presence of a resort, Patoka Lake Village, located along the intended access road and about 300 yards from the launch site. The resort property does not abut the reservoir and there are currently no nearby launch sites for resort patrons to utilize. The resort has been a strong proponent of developing a launch site in this vicinity for a long time and continues to support the concept. Construction of the proposed launch site will undoubtedly increase the market value of the resort and increase the potential for future expansion. The resort currently has 13 cabins, but there is adequate acreage present for major future expansion. Any such expansion may be dependent upon extension of an existing sewer line that currently ends about 1/4 mile away.

Projects funded under the Sport Fish Restoration Program through the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service are not allowed to be done for the benefit of private parties and this project could not be considered if that was the primary motivation. The fact that the preferred launch site was not proposed by any of the field personnel but seems to have come from the top of the agency is also atypical of most access developments. However, there will be obvious public benefit from the proposed site, and it becomes unclear whether benefits to the resort are incidental or primary.

Some concerns are that different resorts at this or other water bodies will also expect launch sites to be constructed near their facilities. Such developments are very unlikely, so other businesses may protest that they have been treated unfairly or have the perception that their competitor was given an undue advantage.

Indiana DNR notes that the original inquiry and expressed support for an access site by the resort owner occurred more than 10 years earlier. They state that the decision to finally move forward on the project is based upon public benefit and staff support. DNR says it routinely rejects similar overtures which do not have merit.

Conversely, the proposed launch site would make an important addition to boating recreation on the reservoir. All field personnel interviewed were in strong agreement that it would receive consistent use. There is easy access to the site from State Road 145 which bisects the reservoir. Unlike some other launch sites on the reservoir, this location is well protected from wave action. Since it is located in the “idle” portion of the reservoir, it will help both anglers and waterfowl hunters access prime sections of the reservoir for angling and hunting. It is also located close enough to the open water section of the reservoir that some boaters will undoubtedly use it to also access the unrestricted portion of the reservoir.

To help counteract any special advantages that guests of the nearby resort may receive from construction of this launch site, several special conditions would be placed upon the site. These conditions are intended to ensure that all public users will have equal access and that this site does not become a de facto launch site for the resort. The proposed conditions have been shown to both Indiana DNR personnel and to the resort management. Neither have voiced any opposition to them. The proposed site conditions are:

1. *There will be no fees charged in association with use of this boat ramp;*
2. *There will be no unattended mooring of boats at the launch site or within the vicinity of the launch site;*
3. *There will be no unattended parking of trailered boats at any public parking areas associated with or in the vicinity of the launch site;*
4. *No boat mooring can occur at the fishing pier, which is intended solely for shore fishing purposes;*
5. *These special site restrictions will be prominently posted at the launch site and enforced.*

AFFECTS TO THE ENVIRONMENT

Alternative A: No Action

The consequences of implementing Alternative "A" would result in no negative impacts to the environment.

Alternative B: Construction in Another Area of the Reservoir

Because of the access restrictions stated above, location of the ramp is confined to the lake west of Walls Ramp and east of the causeway. The lake area between the dam and the 145 causeway is served adequately by existing ramps.

Alternative C: Construction Just South of Preferred Location

This alternative would require the construction of approximately 1/4 mile of new access road and destruction of approximately 4 ac. of upland habitat. Alternative D would remove only about 2.5 ac. of forested habitat. This area is predominately upland/shrub vegetation and is the only area of this type on the peninsula. The surrounding area is mostly forested with the majority of the trees larger than 12" D.B.H. Because this upland/shrub habitat is limited in this area, the affects of disturbance would be increased. Also, since this is a peninsula less than 300 yards wide in one area, the disturbance by vehicular traffic would have a negative impact on the wildlife using the area.

Alternative D: Construction of Ramp at Osborne Bridge Site (Preferred)

Implementing this alternative would lessen construction costs since it takes advantage of an existing county road. Also, it takes advantage of the fishing pier that is already installed and each would complement the other. This location would however, require the removal of approximately 2.5 ac. of lake shore forest habitat. Because Patoka Lake has approximately 7,700 ac. of forest habitat and only 300 ac. more or less of grass/annual vegetation in the non-recreational areas, the loss of the 2.5 ac. of shore line trees would not be of great impact on wildlife species as would the removal of 4-6 ac. of early successional habitat. Loss of the forested habitat will be further minimized with a mitigation plan as shown below. The Division of Fish & Wildlife has determined that the "impacts will be minimal and probably not measurable" on the bald eagle (comments attached).

The Corps of Engineers, in their March 19th. letter, expressed concern over the old bridge abutment and safety features associated with this ramp. Concerning the abutment, during normal water levels, this will cause no hindrance to launching since sufficient water depth will cover the highest point of the bridge. However, property personnel will attempt to remove or alter the structure. If this attempt is unsuccessful, marker buoys will be placed on the bridge frame to alert boaters of its presence.

Concerns over additional safety features have been engineered into the specifications that include rumble strips and the addition of a curvature in the approach road so

vehicles do not mistakenly drive directly onto the ramp and into the reservoir. Also, signs will be placed warning the public that the road ends in the water. These alterations are addressed on the engineering drawings that have been provided.

FOREST MITIGATION PLAN

Because of the loss of approximately 2.5 ac. of forested habitat, the following mitigation plan will be implemented.

1. The loss of forested habitat will be replaced at a 2:1 acreage ratio.
2. The mitigation area will be in the same watershed as the ramp area and on reservoir property so that the area can be protected in perpetuity.
3. The area will be planted with native tree species indigenous to the area.
4. A report will be submitted to the South Region Environmental Biologist, Indiana Division of Fish & Wildlife, located at 2600 North State Road 7, North Vernon, IN 47265. This report is due by the 31st. of December of each year for a maximum of three years after work initiation or until the mitigation site is completed.
5. The mitigation plan will describe the activity accomplished to date, acres seeded or planted, number of trees planted (8'x8' spacing), survival rate, location of site and method of monitoring the progress and success.

PUBLIC INPUT

A legal notice was placed in the local newspapers of the three affected counties; Orange, Crawford and Dubois. The public has 30 days to respond to the project. Copies of responses received, if any, will be forwarded at the end of the comment period.

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AGENCIES INVOLVED:

IDNR, Division of Engineering
IDNR, Division of Historic Preservation and Archaeology
IDNR, Division of Fish & Wildlife

IDNR, Division of State Parks & Reservoirs
IDNR, Division of Water
U.S. Army Corps of Engineers
USFWS, Division of Federal Aid